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ON THE CUNNING CHARACTER OF A COUPLE OF  
CONCHOLOGIST COLLECTORS, WESLEY  
NEWCOMB AND WILLIAM HARPER PEASE

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After making a fortune as one of the earliest investors in the Western Union Telegraph company, Ezra Cornell (1807-1874) established the great university at Ithaca, New York in 1865, which bears his name. Soon after, in 1867, he purchased the extensive conchological collection that had been amassed by Dr. Wesley Newcomb (1818-1892), also a New Yorker. According to Tryon (1865: 378) Newcomb's was then the third largest collection in the United States, containing 10,000 species. It was exceeded in size only by that of the Academy of Natural Sciences of

Philadelphia with 13,000 and that of John Clarkson Jay (1808-1891) of New York with 12,000.

According to Clarke (1960: 137), Cornell paid \$15,000 for the collection, a princely sum in those days. Clarke studied the collection, illustrated the species described by Newcomb as new, and gave an account of his life. The collection is now housed at the Paleontological Research Institution in Ithaca, not far from the University. The same year that Cornell bought the Newcomb collection, the New York State Museum bought the one of Newcomb's late friend, Augustus Addison Gould (1805-1866) of Boston for \$6,000 (Johnson, 1964: 31). The remaining large, nineteenth century American general collection, Jay's, was purchased by Catherine Lorillard Wolfe for \$10,000 and presented to the American Museum of Natural History in memory of her father, that institution's first director, David Wolfe, in 1871 (Johnson, 1999:90).

Dr. Fred Baker, who supplied a previously unpublished anecdote regarding the character of Wesley Newcomb and William Harper Pease, was born at Norwalk, Ohio in 1854. He began the study of Civil Engineering at the then quite new Cornell University in 1870, but his interest in natural history was so strong that he changed to a pre-medical course which also trained naturalists. While still at Cornell, he spent time away studying botany at Kew Gardens in London, then four years in Central America, where he acquired a speaking knowledge of Spanish and an interest in anthropology. He returned to Cornell submitting as a graduation thesis in 1878 a paper on the origin of the Indians of Oaxaca and Chiapas.

Baker received his medical degree from the University of Michigan only two years later in 1880 and a year after married Dr. Charlotte LeBreton Johnson, herself a physician. After a brief practice in Ohio and New Mexico, the couple settled in San Diego, California, then a frontier town of about 2,000. Fred was an active malacologist. He

accompanied the Stanford University expedition to Brazil in 1911, as surgeon and malacologist, made numerous contributions to *The Nautilus* and the *Transactions of the San Diego Society of Natural History*. When he died at the age of 83 in 1937, San Diego was then a metropolis of some 250,000 people, and his large collection was left to the then flourishing Natural History Society. Baker's productive life was described, and his complete works listed by Hertz (1994).

During 1935 and 1936, Baker was working on the description of a number of shells on which William H. Dall of the United States National Museum had left manuscript names, and was carrying on a rather extensive correspondence with William J. Clench of the Museum of Comparative Zoology as to their validity. The following reminiscence is taken from a letter to Clench dated December 1, 1935 in which Baker made a reference to the latter's good fortune in having the Pease collection, purchased by Louis Agassiz in 1871, available to him (Johnson, 1994). The life of William Harper Pease (1824-1871) was extensively researched by Greene (1960) and by Kay (1975) (who did not cite Greene's work).

Joseph Swift Emerson (1843-1930), who related the tale below, was a son of the Rev. John S. and Ursula Newell Emerson who were among the fifth missionary group, to settle in the Hawaiian Islands. He collected the local shells between 1854 and 1927, and presented his extensive collection to the P. B. Bishop Museum (Cooke, 1931). His youngest brother, Rev. Oliver Pomeroy Emerson (1845-1938) also made a collection of land snails, mostly Achatinellidae, which was willed to the Museum of Comparative Zoology. This youngest Emerson described collecting these shells, the pupu oi-oi [(the shrill-voiced shell) a sound actually made by inconspicuous tree crickets] as a youth with his neighbors, the Gulicks, in his book, *Pioneer Days in Hawaii* (1928:15, 204). John

Thomas Gulick (1832-1923), missionary and evolutionist, was to become important for anticipating the central concepts of population genetics (Addison Gulick, 1932). Baker begins:

“Have a rather good story about Pease which I may have told you before. When I was in Honolulu I met Mr. [Joseph Swift] Emerson, son of one of the first [fifth] missionary group, a civil engineer, who was also interested in shells. He had a small but fine collection, mostly Hawaiian. When a student at Cornell in the early seventies I lived in the same house with Wesley Newcomb who did a lot of work in the Hawaiian Islands and California. He finally sold his collection to Cornell for ten thousand dollars [sic] and stayed as Hon. Curator. I saw a good deal of him, eating at the same table. Thinking to ingratiate myself with Emerson, I told him all this. He came back with the candid remark that he was [a] damned old thief, explaining that his father had charge for many years of a big missionary schooner which traded through all the South Seas, getting in trade and as gifts enormous numbers of shells from natives and others. These were supposed to belong to Emerson Sr. Before Newcomb left the Islands he suggested to him that an unnamed collection was not worth much, but that he, Newcomb, would name it up for sets of the shells. This was agreed to, but after Newcomb left they found that he had named the shells, leaving named sets for Emerson and taking the enormous bulk of the collection with him to California, later to be sold to Cornell. Then he added the Pease story as of the same kind. He said that in early days when shipping was not very carefully done, Pease made it a point to be at the wharf every time a

steamer came in. Watching the receipts of the P. O. and Express agents, if he saw a box for anyone who was interested in shells he would say "I am just going up to his house and will deliver the package." Then he would fail to deliver it and hunt it over to see if it contained shells. So you have a part of the stealings and I saw a lot of the rest."

It may not seem fair to quote Baker's tale, casting aspersions on the character of our two conchologists especially after the passage of over one hundred years. Perhaps, the Newcomb story was based on a mere misunderstanding between Newcomb and Rev. John S. Emerson which grew in his son's mind, but the Pease one does have a ring of verisimilitude. Pease's main interest was natural history, especially the shells of the Pacific. In a letter of 1865, quoted by Kay (1975: 6), Pease wrote, "That is all I think or care about."

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